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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 BAGHDAD 000612

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SUBJECT: CHRISTIAN PARLIAMENTARIANS ASSESS PROVINCIAL
ELECTIONS

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Classified By: Deputy Political Counselor Steve Walker for reasons 1.4
(b) and (d).

11. (C) Summary: Key Christian politicians acknowledge that the January 31 provincial elections were generally well organized and that security was excellent, and are pleased that nationalist and secular parties gained at the expense of major Islamic parties. They complained, however, that internally displaced people (IDPs) from the north -- Christian, Kurdish and Arab -- were unable to vote because their names were left off official voter lists. They accused the country's major parties of manipulating the Independent High Electoral Commission (IHEC) to increase their share of power, and alleged that Kurdish political parties manipulated minority voters. They offered no evidence for these allegations, however, and their claims do not jibe with what Embassy observation teams saw in Christian areas of Ninewa on Election Day. End summary.

Assessing the Provincial Council Elections

12. (C) Despite initially calling the January 31 provincial elections a "disaster" for Christians, Assyrian Democratic Movement (ADM) leader and member of parliament Yonadam Kanna conceded that the elections had been generally well organized and that security had been "excellent." Kanna is pleased that Islamic parties made a poor showing, believing the provincial elections will set the tone for the December 2009 parliamentary elections and that the country "is going in the right direction." He encouraged the U.S. to support minor political parties (e.g., by giving them media exposure) so they can strengthen their position in the parliament. Although Kanna repeated an often-heard complaint that IHEC is controlled by the parties in power (emphasizing that IHEC Director Faraj al-Haidari is "a 30-year KDP member"), he did not expect the results to be contested, despite the large number of IDPs who were unable to vote. In an aside, he noted that not only Christian IDPs had been left off voter rolls, but Kurdish and Arab IDPs as well.

13. (C) Kanna claimed that Yezidis were pressured by Kurds to vote for Kurdish parties. Without offering any evidence, Kanna opined that many polling stations had run out of ballots in the afternoon because the Kurds had bussed in Yezidis from outlying villages and had them vote for Kurdish lists, even if they were not listed in the voter rolls. Kanna recounted that, in Baghdad, a Christian priest had been turned away from the polling station he had voted at in past elections because his name could not be found on the voter list. (Comment: Kanna offered no evidence that the Kurdish parties pressured Yezidi voters. Our election observation teams found few such cases. In fact, the anti-KRG candidate beat the pro-KRG candidate in the election for the seat set aside to represent the Yezidi community, and more than half of the Kurdish Alliance's provincial councilors will be Yezidis. In addition, the phenomenon of voters not finding

their names on voters' lists was widespread on election day throughout Iraq, as were allegations that political parties around the country had provided buses to transport voters to polling sites. End comment.)

Variations on IDP Problems; KDP Meddling

¶4. (C) Kanna's colleague in the parliament, Chaldean Democratic Union Party leader Ablahad Afram Sawa, claimed to Poloff on February 2 that, in the north, at least 3,000 IDP voters of all religions and ethnicities had been disenfranchised because their names could not be found on voter lists. Sawa pointed out that this was not a problem when would-be voters in Tel Usquf village were told to go to Batnaya 10 km away. He claimed, however, that many voters had been directed to polling centers 50-60 km away, but did not identify these villages by name. Sawa reported that, in one instance, "a large crowd" of IDP voters in Zakho was told by IHEC officials to go to Dohuk. He said that when they arrived in Dohuk, IHEC officials there still could not find their names on the voter list, but said they would get authorization from IHEC in Baghdad to let them vote. Sawa reported that IHEC did not respond before the polls closed, and the IDP voters were not allowed to cast their ballots.

¶5. (C) Sawa blasted the Ishtar Patriotic List, an Assyrian political entity backed by the owner of Ishtar TV, for receiving under-the-table financing from KRG Finance Minister Sarkis. Sawa also claimed that Ishtar officials were handing out \$100 bribes. According to Sawa, Ishtar also intimidated

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voters by suggesting that their public service benefits, including food aid, would decrease or even disappear if they did not vote for Ishtar.

¶6. (C) Sawa was downbeat about Christian turnout in Baghdad, saying that indifference and fear had resulted in only 10-15% of Christians voting. He claimed that none of the Karrada district's 500 Christian families voted because they were told by IHEC officials to go to a polling center in the distant Jamiat al-Mustansiriyah neighborhood. Like Kanna, Sawa is pleased that Islamic parties did not fare well, and that more secular parties made gains.

Comment

¶7. (C) PRT Ninewa reports that the local Government Electoral Officer (IHEC's senior representative in the province), Abdel Haleq, claimed that the complaints filed with IHEC -- even if all were valid -- would not have affected the outcome, in which the Sunni Arab Al-Hadba party won 19 of 34 open seats and saw anti-KRG parties win two of the three minority seats. It is noteworthy that, echoing Haleq's statements, neither Kanna nor Sawa cited major oppression or harassment of Christian voters. Both have acknowledged in the past that Christians will vote for whoever offers the best deal -- in these elections it seems that the KRG-supported Ishtar list did.

¶8. (C) Ninewa Christian political preferences cannot be discerned from the available data. We know that some 51,000 Ninewa voters cast their ballots for the three minority-quota seats; we also know that the Ishtar list won 65% of the vote for the Christian seat. It is possible that as few as 5,000 people voted for the ADM-affiliated party. While IDPs, voter list problems, strong-arm tactics and other skullduggery may have had some limited effect, our experience on election day, and overall, was that voters made a private decision in a contest whose integrity was strongest in Tal Kayf and Hamdaniya. It is conceivable that the ADM is just not that

popular on the Ninewa Plain. It is also possible that Kanna and others have been revealed as politicians without large local bases of support.

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